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Rapid aversive and memory trace learning during route navigation in desert ants

Short title: Aversive learning during route navigation

Authors and affiliation:

Antoine Wystrach*[1], Cornelia Buehlmann[2], Sebastian Schwarz[1], Ken Cheng[3], Paul Graham[2]

[1] Centre de Recherches sur la Cognition Animale, CNRS, Université Paul Sabatier, Toulouse, F-31062 cedex 09, France

[2] School of Life Sciences, University of Sussex, John Maynard Smith Building, Falmer, Brighton, Sussex BN1 9QG, U.K.

[3] Department of Biological Sciences, Macquarie University, Sydney, NSW 2109, Australia

***Corresponding author and Lead Contact:**

antoine.wystrach@univ-tlse3.fr

Antoine Wystrach

Université Paul Sabatier, Bat 4R3

118 route de Narbonne

31062 cedex 09, Toulouse

France

Summary

The ability of bees and ants to learn long visually guided routes in complex environments is perhaps one of the most spectacular pieces of evidence for the impressive power of their small brains. While flying bees can visit flowers in an optimised sequence over kilometres, walking solitary foraging ants can precisely recapitulate routes of up to a hundred metres in complex environments [1]. It is clear that route following depends largely on learnt visual information and we have a good idea how visual memories can guide individuals along them [2–6], as well as how this is implemented in the insect brain [7,8]. However, little is known about the mechanisms that control route learning and development. Here we show that ants (*Melophorus bagoti* and *Cataglyphis fortis*) navigating in their natural environments can actively learn a route detour to avoid a pit-trap. This adaptive flexibility depends on a mechanism of aversive learning based on memory traces of recently encountered stimuli, reflecting the laboratory paradigm of trace conditioning. The views experienced *before* falling into the trap become associated with the ensuing negative outcome and thus trigger salutary turns on the subsequent trip. This drives the ants to orient away from the goal direction and avoid the trap. If the pit-trap is avoided, the novel views experienced during the detour become positively reinforced and the new route crystallises. We discuss how such an interplay between appetitive and aversive memories might be implemented in insect neural circuitry.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Ants can reshape their route to circumvent a trap.

We first let Australian solitarily foraging ants *Melophorus bagoti* shuttle back and forth between their nest and a feeder full of cookie crumbs located 5 m away. For the outbound trip, the ants had to walk through a long and narrow channel suspended 15 cm above the ground that connected the nest directly to the feeder. For the way back to the nest, ants loaded with a cookie crumb were free to navigate on the desert ground. After a day of shuttling back and forth, all marked ants had established a fairly direct homing route to the nest (Figure 1Ai). We then opened a pit-trap, previously buried inconspicuously into the desert floor, creating a 2 m long, 10 cm wide gap perpendicular to the nest-to-feeder route. During their first homing trial with the trap, all trained ants ran as usual along the first part of the route and suddenly dropped into the trap. The trap was 10 cm wide and 10 cm deep (7 $\times$ 7 cm for *Cataglyphis fortis*) so that ants could see only the sky. The trap had slippery walls to prevent the ants from escaping and contained small twigs, which desert ants naturally tend to avoid as they impede walking. The trap offered a single possible exit formed by a 20 cm wide board (5 cm for *C. fortis*) leading from the base of the trap to the second part of the homeward route. The time the ants were trapped in the trap varied from one to tens of minutes, but once out, all individuals showed no apparent problem in returning directly to their nest (Figure 1Aii). We let ants shuttle back and forth with the trap open and recorded their paths again after 24h. After such training, several ants (4 out of 14, 29%) displayed a new route that circumvented the trap (Figure 1Aiii green trajectories). The tendency to detour the trap on the right side may due to two factors: 1- the nest relocated its entrance slightly on the right (as observed in [9]), so that the trap is not actually perpendicular to the feeder-to-nest beeline, making detours slightly shorter to the right than to the left; 2-a high cluttered region stands on the left of the setup, and desert ant species tend to be repelled by region presenting a high skyline [10,11]. We replicated these experiments at a larger scale (8 m route and 4 m wide trap) with North African desert ants from Tunisia (*Cataglyphis fortis)* and obtained similar results (13 out of 47, 28% avoided the trap after 24h) (Figure 1Bi,ii,iii). Note that black objects were added around the experimental setup to visually enrich the barren *C. fortis* environment (see STAR METHODS).

Why some ants did not learn to circumvent the trap may be due to different reasons. A good proportion of those ants in both species did show modification of their routes by learning to avoid the trap using alternative strategies such as jumping directly onto the exit stick (see red paths in SI1), or simply learning a quick route through the trap by systematically falling in at the same spot and quickly reaching the exit stick with very little search (see Ant 7 in SI1). Finally, some ants simply did not learn, perhaps because they performed too few training trials within the 24h period. Our personal observations were that the specifics of how ants hit the pit-trap influenced their ultimate strategy. Some ants fell by chance near the exit bridge and so spent less time in the trap itself. These ants were more likely to develop a strategy that depended on hitting the trap, but also knowing how to get out quickly. Future experiments could investigate the possibility that a longer time of being trapped yields stronger aversive memories. In any case, a simple categorisation of whether the ants circumvented the trap or not is sufficient to show that such an effect is unlikely to happen by chance (1st_trial_with_trap vs. 24h_with_trap: $N_{(circumvented)}$ /$N_{(all\ ants)}$: 0/30 vs. 17/61, Fisher's Exact test $p<0.001$), and that there was no apparent difference in detour success between species (24h_with_trap *M. bagoti vs. C. fortis*: $N_{(circumvented)}$ /$N_{(all\ ants)}$: 4/14 vs. 13/47, Fisher's Exact test $p=1$).

New routes are based on learnt terrestrial cues.

Desert ants are well known to follow habitual routes guided by learnt terrestrial cues although they also have access to their Path Integration (PI) system at all times [12,13], a navigational strategy that is particularly pronounced in *C. fortis* [14]. We carried out several manipulations to ask whether learnt terrestrial cues, rather than PI, were controlling the new routes of our foragers.

Ants captured just before entering their nest and then re-released at the feeder are called zero vector (ZV) ants because their PI state is zero at the onset of homing, and thus no longer provides correct homeward information. Such ZV ants that had circumvented the trap during their previous (full vector, FV) run were equally successful in their subsequent ZV run (Figure 1Biv) whereas ants that had fallen into the trap as FV ants still did so as ZV ants (previous_FV circumvented vs. previous_FV fell: $N_{(circumvented)}$ /$N_{(all\ ants)}$: 12/12 vs. 2/13, Fisher exact test

p<0.001), showing that guidance along the newly learnt route does not require PI. Interestingly, ZV ants displayed turns before the trap even if they had failed as FV, showing that the learning process itself has to do with views rather than the ant's PI state. Note also that 2 out of 13 ants fell as FV but avoided the trap as ZV, which further supports the hypothesis of visual route learning. We know that the directional dictates of PI and learnt visual guidance are integrated, even when pointing in different directions [15–18]. Thus, in FV ants, the PI vector points directly to the nest and thus may bias the path towards the trap. Therefore, the paths of ZV ants are more representative of the route as guided by terrestrial cues. Nevertheless, the extent to which PI information may be associated with aversive experiences should be more fully studied.

We further tested whether ants that had learnt a new route to circumvent the trap would still follow it, if the trap was removed again. Five out of the six individuals tested displayed the usual detour even though the trap had been removed (Figure 1Aiv; No_trap_initially vs. trap_removed_again: $N_{(circumvented)}$ /$N_{(all\ ants)}$: 1/20 vs. 5/6, Fisher exact test p<0.001). This confirms that the detour does not depend on perceiving the trap, but on route memories.

Finally, we recorded a cohort of ants that had started their foraging life while the trap was already in place. We did not control how many trials each ant produced but within a period of 24h we observed that several individuals learnt routes that circumvented the trap (Figure 1Av). The proportion of ants that circumvented the trap was similar between these ants and ants that had some route experience before the trap was set in place (24h_with_trap_naive vs. 24h_with_trap: $N_{(circumvented)}$ /$N_{(all\ ants)}$: 5/15 vs. 4/14, Fisher exact test p=1). This shows that a route that circumvents a hidden trap will develop naturally, whether the trap is novel or has been there for all of an ant's foraging career.

The use of chemical trails, scent marks or other social information would be unlikely in these highly visual solitary foraging ants, however we can further definitively rule them out, by observing the typical idiosyncrasies of ants' individual routes [19–21]: even though trials were interleaved between individuals and spanning over different days, routes are remarkably similar across subsequent trials of a same individual (Figure 2A, Figure S1) but they vary substantially across individuals (Figure 1, Figure S1). We can be confident that ants were not using social information, but private information based on learnt terrestrial cues. The nature

of these learnt terrestrial cues is not crucial for our purpose here, but based on past evidence with desert ants, which run at high speed (>50cm/s) with the head and antenna lifted upwards, we can be confident that it is mostly based on visual cues [9,19,22], typically the recognition of familiar panoramic views [3,23,24]. To ease the reading, we will now refer to these learnt terrestrial cues as 'familiar views'.

How do ants reshape their routes? Evidence for aversive and memory trace learning.

To shed light on the processes that lead from an established route to a new route that circumvents the trap, we tracked all successive trials of individually marked *M. bagoti* ants from the first time they encountered the trap onwards. In addition to their paths, we recorded the locations where ants stopped and scanned their surroundings. Scanning is a typical behaviour in desert ant navigators (and particularly obvious in *M. bagoti)*: the ant suddenly stops and rotates on the spot, pausing in different directions successively [25]. Scans are triggered when an ant experiences a decrease in visual familiarity [25], when multiple directional cues are put into conflict [26,27], when running a route has not resulted in success [4,27], or simply when naïve ants exit their nest for the first time [28–30]. In other words, the occurrence of scanning reflects a directional uncertainty in an ant's navigational system [25].

As described above, on the first run with the trap in place, ants rush along their direct homeward route and fall into the trap. In subsequent trials, routes of most ants changed and some eventually circumvented the trap. We supposed two potential mechanisms. First, it could be that the negative event of falling into the trap triggers learning oriented behavioural routines that occur immediately after the negative event. This was not the case. When ants emerged from the trap, they rushed towards their nest as usual, and displayed neither more scanning or meandering than before the trap was set (Second part of the route: *Trial before trap* vs. *Trial with first trap fall*: mode = 0 scan/ant in both cases, glme #Scan: t=0.359 p=0.721; glme meander z=0.027 p=0.978; Figures 2Bi and 2Bii, see also Figures 1Aii and Bii)).

Second, ants could keep memory traces of the scenes experienced immediately before falling into the trap, and change the valence of these recent memories given the current negative experience of being trapped. In our paradigm, this would predict that ant behaviour will be

affected on the run subsequent to falling in the trap when in the area immediately before the trap. Indeed, this is what we observed. Ants displayed a clear increase in scanning behaviours in the region before the trap (mode and median = 2 scans/ant, Figure 2Biii), significantly more than they had on their previous run (mode and median = 0 scan/ants, Figure 2Bii) before falling into the trap for the first time (First part of the route: *Trial with first trap fall vs. Trial following first trap-fall*: glme #Scan: $t=4.186$ $p<0.001$). Similarly, their paths showed significantly more meandering as they approached the trap for the second time compared to their previous run (First part of the route: *Trial with first trap fall vs. Trial following first trap-fall*: glme meander: $z=3.006$ $p=0.003$).

Mechanistically, learning must be based on a memory trace because the US (i.e., being in the trap) is experienced after the CS (i.e., the view of the surrounding scenery), and crucially, with no time overlap: for being in the trap (US) prevents entirely the view of the scenery (CS), and the trap is invisible from outside. Being exposed to the CS before the US with no time overlap between both stimuli reflects the laboratory paradigm of 'trace conditioning' [31]. How long is the delay between CS and US cannot be determined in our natural situation, although the apparent increase of scanning behaviours up to 2 metres before the trap (Figures 2A, 2C) suggests that the memory trace of the views may be kept for at least a couple of seconds. The resulting aversive memory formed, however, lasts across days to trigger salutary avoidance and scanning behaviours (Figure 2A, 'day2' grey arrow).

Aversive trace learning also provides an explanation for past results: ants repeatedly captured at the same location and asked to repeat their visually guided route display turns and avoidance behaviours before the capture point after a couple of trials only [27]. Being captured likely provides a negative US and the views preceding the capture point become aversive. This happens even though the ants were never allowed to reset their Path Integrator by being put back to the nest [32], showing that such long term aversive memories can be formed rapidly and without the need of the PI system.

Neural implications.

We now have a good idea of the neural underpinnings of learning in insects from studies of the Mushroom Bodies (MB) [33–37], which are assumed to be the seat of the route visual memories [8,38,39] (Figure 3). Each view experienced can be represented by a specific pattern of activation of Kenyon Cells (KC) in the MB [7], and KCs project onto multiple output neurons (MBONs) conveying different valences [40,41]. By modulating the synaptic weights between the active KCs and specific MBONs, views can be thus be associated with positive or negative valences, presumably inciting forward movements [7,8] or turns respectively (see also [42]).

To accommodate these principles of MB function our results simply require that 1- a trace (or tag) must remain in the KCs neurons (or their output synapses) for at least a few seconds after they have fired; and 2- A negative event (such as being trapped) must be able to change the valence associated with the tagged neurons, so that familiar views perceived before falling into the trap become less positive or aversive (Figure 3).

How and where exactly the tagging may happen remains unclear as several types of modulatory neurons project to these mushroom body compartments [43,44]. Finally, if it is now clear that being trapped or caught can constitute a negative reinforcement, what constitutes positive reinforcement during route learning is still unclear: it could be reaching the nest or running down the PI accumulated home vector [7]. Such positive reinforcement might also involve the 'tagged neurons', so that not only the current but also the previously experienced views that led to a positive outcome become associated to a positive valence. In any case, it is clear that route reshaping here results from an interplay between avoidance behaviour triggered by memory trace learning and appetitive learning based on positive reinforcement (Figure 3).

CONCLUSION

We have demonstrated here how memory trace learning is adaptively applied to navigation in natural habitats, where a negative experience labels specific locations in space that precede the aversive event. Behaviourally, this allows an ant to solve a navigational problem by efficiently reshaping its route through the world. Such route plasticity thus results from an interesting interplay between aversive and appetitive visual memories, and between avoidance learning (a form of negative reinforcement) and positive reinforcement, which matches well our current understanding of insect learning circuits.

Acknowledgments

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Author contributions

Conceptualisation: A.W.; Methodology: A.W., C.B., S.S., P.G.; Formal analysis: A.W. Investigation: A.W., C.B., S.S.; Writing - original draft: A.W., P.G.; Writing - review & editing: A.W., C.B., S.S., K.C.; P.G.; Funding: A.W., C.B., K.C., P.G.

Declaration of interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Main-text figure legends

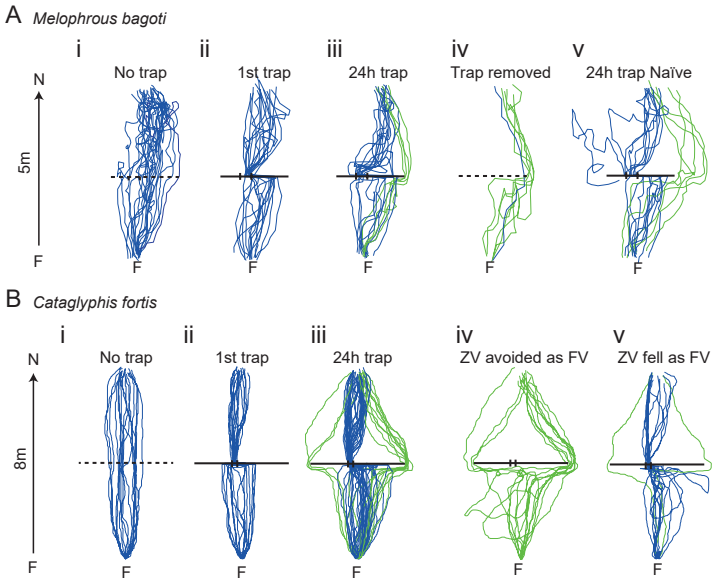

Figure 1. Negative experience shapes ants' routes. **A.** Australian desert ants (*Melophorus bagoti*) or **B** North African desert ants (*Cataglyphis fortis*) were followed for a series of homeward routes from a permanent feeder (F), with a pit-trap in place (solid line) or covered over (dashed line). Two small dashes across the trap line indicate the escape board. Green paths from ants that circumvent the pit-trap and blue paths from ants that fall into the trap. (i) Control routes of ants between feeder and nest, without trap (A, n=20; B, n=16). (ii) The first route after the installation of the pit-trap (A, n=15; B, n=15). (iii) Paths after the pit-trap has been in place for 24 hours (A, n=14; B, n=47). (iv) and (v) show different conditions for the two species. (Aiv) paths of *M. bagoti* ants that had previously learnt to circumvent the trap, tested with the trap covered (n=6). (Av) the paths of ants that had begun their foraging life (i.e., since naïve stage) with the trap in place and had 24 hours of foraging experience (n=15). (Biv, v) paths of *C. fortis* ants tested as ZV ants (without useful path integration information, as the path integrator no longer points towards the nest, but towards the feeder) that had previously succeeded (Biv, n=12) or failed (Bv, n=13) to circumvent the trap as full-vector ants. 'n' refers to the number of ants tested.

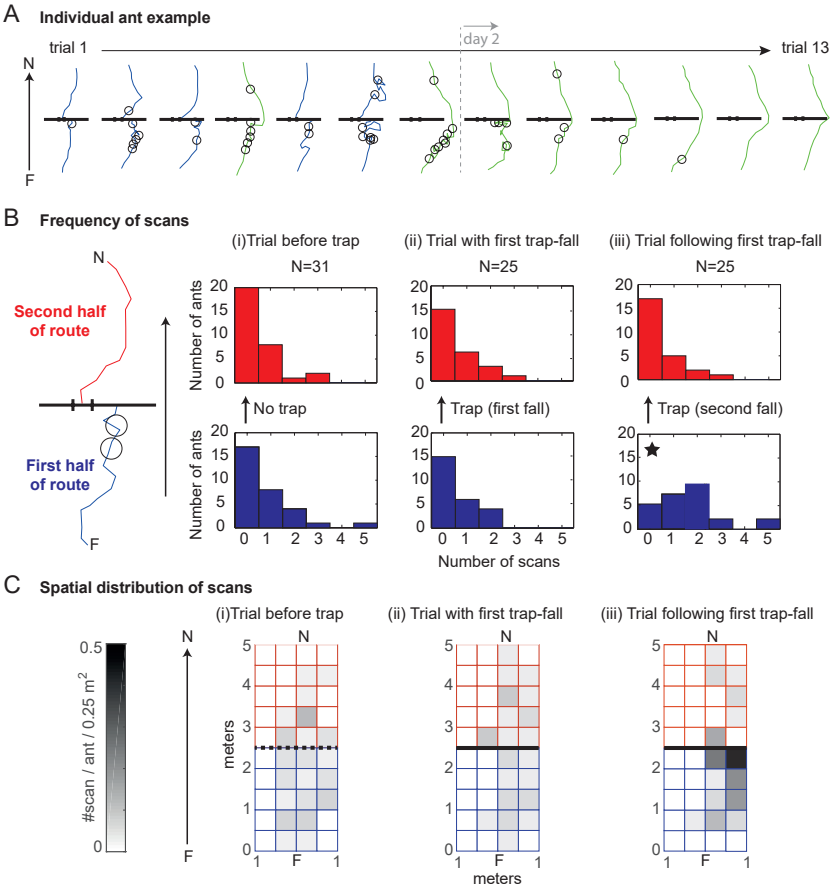

Figure 2. Negative experience modifies the memory of the views experienced before the trap. Individually marked ants of *Melophorus bagoti* were tracked for a sequence of runs before and after the activation of the pit-trap. **A.** Sample sequence from a single ant. Locations where the ant stops and scans the world are marked with a circle. As elsewhere in the paper, paths are coloured coded: blue for ant paths that fall into the trap and green paths that avoid the trap. See Figure S1 for more individual examples. **B.** For each ant the number of scans was recorded before (bottom, blue) and after (top, red) the trap across three focal trials. (i) Trial before the trap was activated; (ii) Trial with first trap-fall; (iii) Trial following first trap-fall. From this we calculated the probability of an ant scanning ($N_{(ants\ scan>0)}/N_{(all\ ants)}$), and the median number of scans, for each trial and route segment. Before the trap: (i) N=31 proba=0.45 Median=0 (ii) N=25 proba=0.40 Median=0 (iii) N=25 proba=0.80 Median=2. Star indicate a significant increase in scan number (see text for detail). After the trap: (i) N=31 proba=0.35 Median=0 (ii) N=25 proba=0.40 Median=0 (iii) N=25 proba=0.32 Median=0. **C.** For the same three focal trials, the location of scans is shown relative to the Feeder (F, (0,0)), Nest

(N, (0,5)) and Pit Trap (Black line, y=2.5). Darker areas represent higher scan numbers. Upward arrows in left panels indicate route direction.

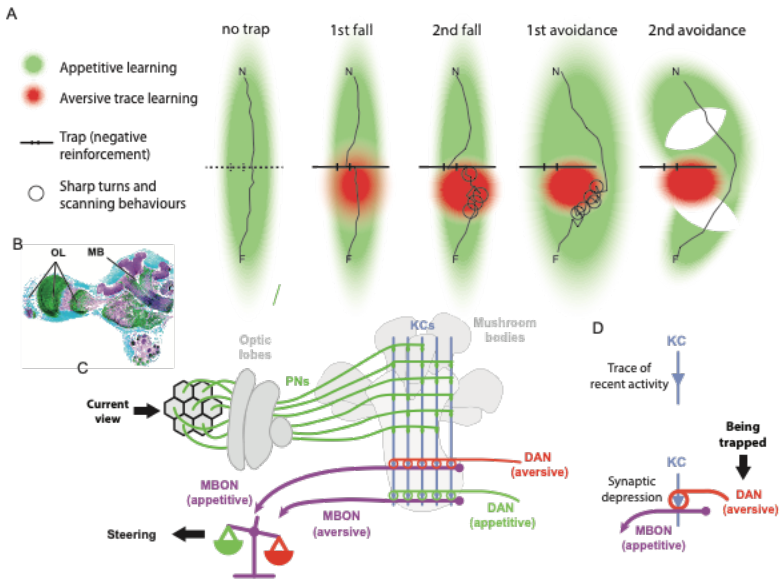

Figure 3. Overview of the appetitive and aversive learning experiences. A. illustrations of the concept. Across a sequence of journeys for a typical ant we show the regions of operation for aversive (red) and appetitive (green) learning. The aversive region is first formed by memory trace learning on the trials where the ant encounters the trap. Over time a detour develops, and the new route is maintained by appetitive processes. **B**. Picture of a *Cataglyphis fortis* brain's right hemisphere showing the optic lobes (OL) and Mushroom-Bodies (ML) (modified from [45]) **C**. Mushroom-Bodies neural architecture derived from the insect literature [8,46]. Visual information is sparsely projected via visual Projection Neurons (PNs) to the Kenyon Cells (KCs). KC activity thus represents views that can be associated with the Mushroom Body output neurons (MBONs) mediating appetitive or aversive valences. Such associations result from the modulation of KC-to-MBON synapses; the modulation is generated by the co-activation of KCs and dopaminergic neurons (DANs) relaying the valence of the current situation. The resulting balance between aversive and appetitive MBON activities can then control steering. **D**. The current study suggests memory trace learning as a mechanism to explain the reshaping of routes. First, a trace of the KC activity must be kept for a few seconds (top panel). Second, the co-activation of a dopaminergic neuron modulates the KC-to-MBON synapses of these recently activated KCs (bottom panel). Note that

modulation consists of a synaptic depression, which explains why DANs of a given valence modulate MBONs of the opposite valence. Thus an aversive situation, such as being trapped, will be mediated by a DAN decreasing the connection strength between the recently activated KCs and the appetitive MBON. These KCs will no longer activate the appetitive MBON, but still activate the aversive MBON. In other words, the view experienced before the trap will henceforth trigger an aversive response.

STAR Methods

LEAD CONTACT AND MATERIALS AVAILABLITY

Further information and requests for resources should be directed to and will be fulfilled by the Lead Contact, Antoine Wystrach (antoine.wystrach@univ-tlse3.fr). This study did not generate new unique reagents.

EXPERIMENTAL MODEL AND SUBJECT DETAILS

Two species were tested in this study: the Australian red honey ant, *Melophorus bagoti* and the Saharan desert ant *Cataglyphis fortis.* Both species are highly thermophilic ants (Wehner, 1987; Christian & Morton, 1992) that forage solitarily on dead insects and plant materials (Muser et al., 2005). Experiments with *M. bagoti* were achieved in January-March 2014, ~10 km south of Alice Springs, Australia, on the grounds of the Centre for Appropriate Technology, in a semi-arid desert habitat characterised by red soil, grass tussocks, bushes, and trees of Acacia and Eucalyptus species. Field experiments with *C. fortis* were performed in June-July 2015 in a flat salt pan (34.954897 N, 10.410396 E) near the village of Menzel Chaker, Tunisia. By using two species of desert ants that belong to different phylogenetic tribes, we hoped to investigate the generality of this route re-learning process.

METHOD DETAILS

Experimental set-ups

The experimental set-ups for the two species were similar, with a larger scale for *C. fortis* to reflect their typically longer range of foraging (up to hundreds of meters for *C. fortis* and up to 70 m in *M. bagoti*, personal observation) [14]. Measurements below are given for *M. bagoti*, followed by *C. fortis* in brackets. Experiments were undertaken with a nest located in an area cleared of grass but surrounded by bushes and trees (or artificially added large black cylinders for *C. fortis*) providing rich visual information for navigation.

In both experimental set-ups, ants moved between their nest and a feeder full of cookie crumbs 5 m (8 m for C*. fortis*) away. The ants' nest was covered with an overturned bucket that had the bottom removed, whose opening at ground level was connected to a straight outbound channel (5 m long, 10 × 10 cm for *M. bagoti*; 8 m long, 7 × 7 cm for *C. fortis*) elevated 15 cm above the ground, which was always in place and thus belonged to the scenery. This outbound channel suddenly ended above the feeder, into which ants would drop. The feeder was a small plastic container sunk into the ground providing biscuit crumbs *ad libitum*. To return to the nest, the ants climbed out of the feeder using a small ramp and walked on the desert ground back to the nest. Removing the feeder ramp at critical times allowed us to control which ants ran their homeward journey and when. Halfway along their homing route, a plastic channel was buried inconspicuously into the desert floor, creating a 2 m long, 10 cm wide (4 m long 7 cm wide for *C. fortis*) trap perpendicular to the nest-to-feeder route. The trap was buried entirely so as to remain invisible to the ants. The trap had smooth walls and was filled with twigs to hinder ant movement. Ants could leave the trap by using a single exit formed of a stick bridge 20 cm wide (5 cm for *C. fortis*), connecting the bottom of the trap to the second part of the route. A grid of lines (mesh width: 1 m) was set up by winding strings around pegs (or by painting on the ground with *C. fortis*) and the ants' homing paths before and after introducing the trap were recorded on squared paper. During initial training the trap was covered by a thin board, with desert sand scattered on top, so that the ants could shuttle unimpeded.

Experimental protocols

For both species, ants that arrived at the feeder were marked with a dot of day-specific enamel paint to ensure that ants were experienced before the trap was set. Only ants with at

least 24 hours experience were recorded. Once the trap was set, the ants' first homing paths after trap introduction were recorded as well as their paths 24 hours later.

With *C. fortis* a group of ants was recorded twice. Here, the ants performed their homing route and just before they entered the nest they were taken and released again at the feeder as zero-vector ants, to test whether PI could provide an alternative explanation to views. *C. fortis* is well suited for this control as this species is known to strongly rely on PI (compared to *M. bagoti*) [14].

With *M. bagoti*, an additional treatment was enacted. Successful ants that circumvented the trap were marked and, once they return to the feeder again, tested with the trap covered again (as in the initial training).

Another condition was tested with naïve *M. bagoti* ants. The trap was set in place and all ants were marked for 5 consecutive days. After this period, all unpainted ants reaching the feeder were considered 'naïve' and were painted with a specific colour. Naïve ants were free to forage for 24 hours before being recorded.

Finally, some *M. bagoti* ants were marked with individual colour codes in order to obtain a record of the evolution of individual routes. In this treatment, we recorded both the path and the occurrence of the clear cut scanning behaviours typically observed in this species [25].

QUANTIFICATION AND STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

Paths were digitised using the software Graphclick. Meander was calculated as the mean angular deviation in direction between successive 30 cm chunks of the ants' paths. For the '*Avoid vs. fell comparison'* we used Fisher's Exact Test to look for differences between groups in the ratio of ants that circumvented or fell into the trap. For the '*Scan number and meander*' comparisons ants were followed individually across successive trials. We compared *scan number* and *meander* across three situations: (i) Trial before trap; (ii) Trial with first trap-fall; (iii) Trial following first trap-fall for two sections of the route, before the trap and after the trap, separately. To analyse the number of scan per ants, we used a generalised linear mixed

effects model with ants as a random effect for count data. Given that the dispersion parameter (null deviance / df = 2.67 for ‘first part of the route’ and 2.08 for ‘second part of the route’) is above 2, we used a quasiPoisson distribution rather than a Poisson distribution (glmmPQL from MASS library in R). For meander values, we scaled the data between 0 (Meander = 0deg) and 1 (Meander = 180deg) and used a generalised linear mixed effects model for proportional data with ants as a random effect (family="beta", link="probit" ; glmmTMB library in R).

DATA AND CODE AVAILABILITY

All data are available at:

https://github.com/awystrac/Rapid-aversive-and-memory-trace-learning_Current_Biol_2020/commits?author=awystrac

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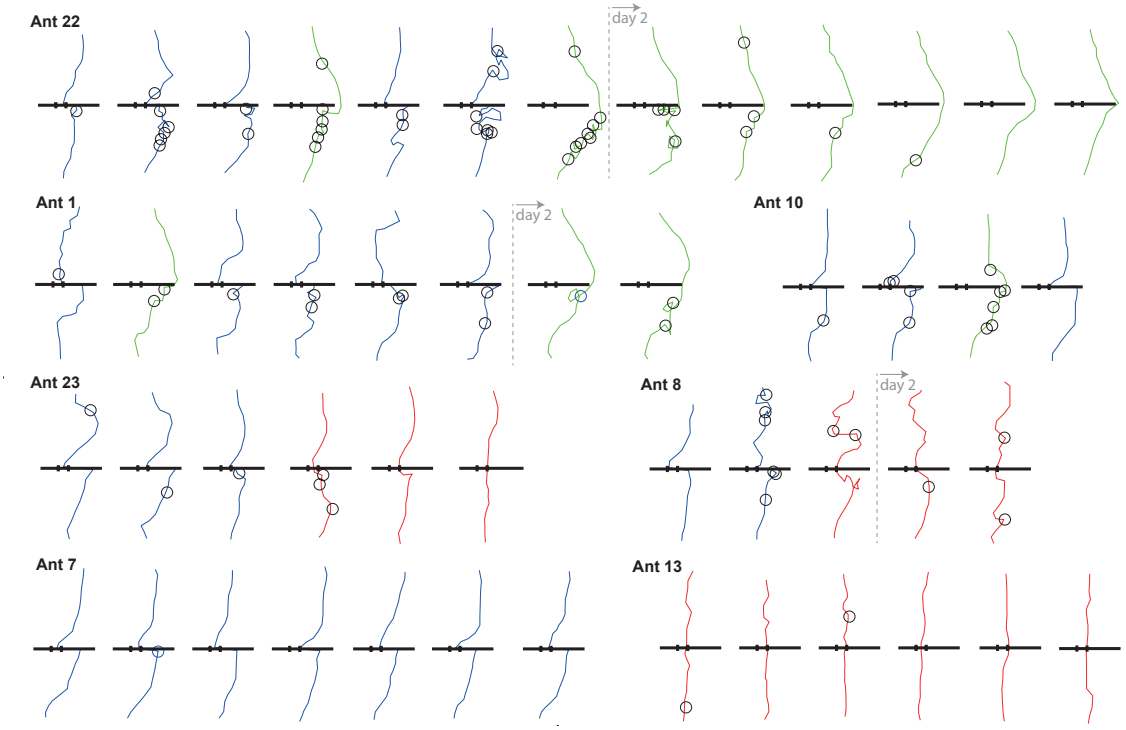

Figure S1. Route shape and scanning ontogeny for individual ants. Related to Figure 2. Successive routes of *Melophorus bagoti* individuals from the first run incorporating the trap onwards. Scan locations are marked with a circle and routes are colour coded as in Figure 1 and 2 with the addition of paths marked in red for ants that learnt to use the stick bridge efficiently.